DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 175 IR 052 625

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TITLE	Online Information Services for Secondary School Students: A Current Assessment. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources, Syracuse, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-IR-88-7
PUB DATE	Jun 88
CONTRACT	RI88062008
NOTE	3p.; This digest is based on the ERIC/IR Clearinghouse Information Analysis Product, "Online Information Services for Secondary School Students: A Current Assessment," by Elizabeth Smith Aversa, Jacqueline C. Mancall, and Diane Oesau (ED 295 682).
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/IR, 030 Huntington Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244-2340 (free while supply lasts).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Databases; Guidelines; Learning Resources Centers; *Media Specialists; Needs Assessment; Objectives; *Online Searching; Optical Data Disks; School Libraries; Secondary School Students; Student Behavior; Teaching Methods; Use Studies
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest begins with a brief discussion of the current status of the relatively recent phenomenon of online searching in schools. The advantages and disadvantages of online access in this context are then outlined, and some suggestions are offered for school library media specialists who wish to initiate online information retrieval for their students. A brief review of studies of the impact of online services on student behavior and a future scenario for online services in school settings conclude the digest. (7 references) (CGD)

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ERIC DIGEST

June 1988

EDO-IR-88-7

ONLINE INFORMATION SERVICES FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: A CURRENT ASSESSMENT

This digest is based on **Online Information Services for Secondary School Students: A Current Assessment**, by Elizabeth Smith Aversa, Jacqueline C. Mancall, and Diane Oesau, an ERIC Information Analysis Product available from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources.

Current Status

Online searching in schools is a relatively recent phenomenon. The earliest reported access to online databases was in 1976 in the Montgomery County Public School System in Maryland, when high school seniors were allowed to supplement their manual information gathering by submitting search requests to the district's Professional Library to be conducted by professional searchers. DIALOG reports that the first instructional password for training students to search was acquired by Radnor High School in Pennsylvania in 1980. Since that time the importance of providing information for students from electronic sources has been acknowledged by a growing number of school library media specialists and administrators at the local and state levels, who have acquired the equipment, supported training, arranged for financial support, and developed curriculum materials.

Schools across the country have expanded reference and bibliographic access by going online, although such access is still extremely limited in scale, and where it does occur, is often limited to a special group of students or classes.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Access

There are numerous advantages to connecting students and information electronically. Such access extends the limited resources available to them in the school library media center, increasing the potential diversity of information available to solve information related problems. Students are able to locate the most current information since online databases are updated at frequent intervals. Search time is reduced by the cumulated, comprehensive database indexes. Additional entry points for searching are available, such as key words and phrases. In addition, electronic access creates excitement about the search process, and provides a means to search multi-faceted topics.

One of the major disadvantages is that going directly to an online search may not be the best approach for all subjects, e.g., a single concept search. Other disadvantages include the lack of suitable databases for students in some subject areas; difficulties in finding some of the journals and sources identified by the online search; user frustration when computer systems are down or telecommunications difficulties are encountered; start-up and training costs; investments in materials and equipment; and the additional time for media center staff if online is added to the existing services provided.

Getting Started

School library media specialists who wish to initiate online information retrieval for students must, first of all, understand what online access is and the type of information suitable for students that is available online. Equipment, telecommunications software, and a search service vendor must be selected, and curricular objectives and materials must be prepared. While the rationale for the budget will depend on the goals and objectives established for the program, specific budget items will fall into the categories of capital expenses for equipment and space needs; operating expenses for connect time, communication costs, supplies, documentation, professional training, print charges, fees for saved searches, and costs of online ordering; and miscellaneous expenses such as equipment upgrades and maintenance, and travel to online conferences and demonstrations.

It has been suggested that library media specialists might prefer to skip online systems and wait to move directly into CD-ROM, which would provide access to databases in disk format on a subscription basis and permit unlimited searching of locally held databases.

Aversa and Mancall (1986) suggest six instructional goals for teaching online to students: (1) training students to become knowledgeable information seekers; (2) expanding students' perceptions of how to access their information environment; (3) assisting students in refining their information research process; (4) creating enthusiasm among students for independent investigations; (5) working cooperatively with teachers in planning online instruction that is integrated with classroom activities; and (6) expanding the knowledge of teachers and administrators about what information is available electronically and how to access it.

Aversa and Mancall (1986) also suggest that school media specialists working with online services will need to have: (1) enhanced interviewing skills for working with students and teachers in the pre-search stage; (2) knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of using different vendors and of the content of available databases; (3) online search skills; (4) knowledge of other community resources and formal and informal ways of accessing materials in their collections; (5) management strategies for financial control, planning, training, general collection development, and evaluation of the service; and (6) knowledge of how to teach online searching.

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Impact of Online Services on Student Behavior

Both obtrusive and unobtrusive measurement strategies have been used to assess the impact of teaching online searching on the behavior of students. Craver (1985) directly asked students' opinion of the worthwhileness of completed units on online instruction with positive results. Others (Mancall & Bertland, 1985; Mancall & Deskins, 1984; Wozny, 1982) report the use of such unobtrusive measures as comparing the referencing patterns in papers of students who have had the opportunity to search online. Other means of examining student response to online training that have been reported include testing students on their understanding of terminology, selection of appropriate databases, search formulation, and interpretation of an online citation (Craver, 1985); keeping online logs to capture data on who is searching and for which courses; the level of satisfaction of those who search or request a search; subject areas that are most frequently searched, in which databases, and with what success; types of materials that are being referenced; number of relevant references retrieved and average cost per relevant reference; and how many relevant references are available on site or locally (Mancall & Bertland, 1985).

While few basic patterns have been uncovered, Wozny (1982) reports that whether or not students use materials identified by online searching in their papers, those who have been taught online searching use more current and more diverse types of materials than similar students who have not been exposed to this innovation. She believes that the major influences on the student are the teacher and cooperating library media specialist who used online searching as a technique to achieve their educational objectives, i.e., assisting students to develop appropriate search strategies, and expanding their concepts of the different types of information available.

Future Scenario

A synthesis of the literature and survey of current practice in secondary schools in 1986 point to the following:

- Online service in school settings has arrived and is at a point of rapid expansion.
- Although only a small number of printed resources exist to support instruction in this area, the school media specialist can anticipate the development of commercially produced materials as more of the major database vendors, producers, and publishers realize the economic potential of this market.
- The range of information services and their management in the school setting will undergo considerable change in response to the initiation of online services.
- Online services as reported here may be a transient technology. The availability of databases on CD-ROM, the possibility of shared disks, and the continuing need for currency must all be considered as schools plan for the provision of information to students, teachers, and administrators. (Aversa, Mancall, & Oesau, 1987, pp. 25-26)

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This digest based on *Information Services for Secondary School Students: A Current Assessment* (Aversa, Mancall, and Oesau, 1987) was prepared for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources by Barbara B. Minor. June 1988.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062008. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.